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UNH Professor Talks Racing on The Learning Channel

By [Erika Mantz](#)

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DURHAM, N.H. -- In his first television appearance, UNH classics professor Stephen Brunet compares today's auto racing to chariot racing, the most popular sporting event of the ancient world. Chariot Racing 2002 airs this Sunday, Dec. 8, at 6 p.m. on The Learning Channel.

"I'm a historian by nature, and you would be surprised at how much you can learn about a time and culture through its sports," says the assistant professor in the Languages, Literatures, and Cultures Department's classics program. "I discuss the comparisons, but also look at racing as a social phenomenon."

As part of the program, Brunet was on the track during an Indy 500 race in Los Angeles doing interviews last spring. He talked to many of the racecar drivers, who said they wouldn't do chariot racing because it's too dangerous.

"Chariot racing was more dangerous because things in general were more dangerous," Brunet says, "but I'm convinced that if today's drivers had lived in the ancient world, they would have been chariot racers. The Greeks and the Romans tried to balance excitement and risk just like we do today. It wasn't like 'Gladiator.'"

Brunet describes the program, originally produced for the BBC, as experimental archaeology. A relatively new area, it attempts to solve a problem about the ancient world by recreating it as accurately as possible.

He says this recreation is the first time a chariot has actually been raced as it would have been in Nero's time. Brunet laughs when he recalls the producer asking if he was willing to drive a chariot, noting he never has

seriously ridden horses, and experienced riders trained for more than three weeks before competing in a specially built amphitheater. As a result, a long-time mystery about how the horses were yoked was solved, and Brunet learned that size does in fact matter, but not in the way historians believed.

"We thought charioteers would be like today's jockeys , small and light , but the recreation showed us that tall and strong had its advantages," he says.

Brunet says a lot of questions could be answered using experimental archaeology, but there's one in particular that intrigues him.

"What was it like to compete nude?"

Brunet says that while chariot drivers had complex costumes and safety equipment, as described in the show, Greek and eventually Roman boxers and runners didn't wear any clothing when they competed, and he wonders what effect that freedom would have on today's athletes.

That's one question he believes will remain unanswered for some time due to filming challenges.

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